DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 219 666 CG 016 089

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TITLE Survey of Spouse Abuse Shelters: A Family Systems Perspective.
PUB DATE Aug 81
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (89th, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Battered Women; *Counseling Services; *Counseling Techniques; Counselors; *Crisis Intervention; *Family Counseling; Family Problems; *Marital Instability; Program Descriptions; Research Projects; Social Exchange Theory; Surveys; Systems Approach
IDENTIFIERS *Spouse Abuse Shelters

ABSTRACT

Traditional psychological theories which focus on the pathological tendencies of the individual account for little of the reported widespread spouse abuse. Social exchange and general systems theories focus on problems in the relationship rather than problems in the person. Given that a family perspective may be helpful in long-term treatment of spouse abuse, a survey was conducted of 111 spouse abuse shelters to assess the extent to which these interventions are used. Results showed that 81% of the shelters were designed to be a resource for individuals in crisis situations. In addition, 37% of the shelters employed a general systems approach (problem-solving tasks and communication skills), while 23% used a social exchange approach (behavior modification, behavioral contracts, and role playing techniques). The findings suggest that a trend in treating the marital couple/family in spouse abuse cases is emerging. (Author/JAC)

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SURVEY OF SPOUSE ABUSE SHELTERS: A FAMILY SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

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CG 016089

Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Los Angeles, CA, August 24-26, 1981.

Traditional psychological theories have focused on pathological tendencies within the individual as the primary cause of marital violence. These characteristics, however, account for little of the widespread spouse abuse reported (Goode, 1974), and thus it seems necessary to look at the dynamics operating within the family. The importance of a family system perspective lies in focusing on problems in the relationship rather than problems in the person. Techniques used in family therapy are designed to change the pattern of husband-wife relationships from a destructive to a constructive interaction.

This study focuses on two theoretical approaches, social exchange and general systems which have been translated into family therapy treatment techniques and interventions. The first approach, the social exchange perspective, leads to behavioral techniques related to social interaction. Marital conflict is generally viewed as a breakdown in mutual reinforcement (Stuart, 1976). Social exchange theorists agree that the most effective type of intervention should focus on increasing a mutual balance of increasing positive acts and decreasing negative acts. Generally, family therapists who use behavioral interventions based on this perspective focus on changing the dynamics of spousal interaction patterns with behavioral contracting and behavioral modification techniques (Olson, 1976).

Within the systems theory, the second approach, the communication aspect is the main focus for intervention programs. Don Jackson, the leading proponent in this area, believes that communication patterns define a relationship and reveal how two or more people relate to one another (Foley, 1974). Marital conflict is seen as involving a breakdown in communication patterns and effective problem-solving strategies which could lead toward aggression and violence between spouses. Treatment and intervention techniques used by communication family therapists are aimed at improving problem-solving abilities and interpersonal exchanges of

communication (Alexander, 1973; Miller, 1976).

Given that a family perspective might aid in the long-term treatment of spouse abuse, a survey was conducted to assess the extent to which these interventions are currently being utilized in shelters for battered individuals.

Method

A list of all known battered wife shelters with housing available (as of January, 1979) was compiled from national directories. A questionnaire was mailed to 180 shelters across the country with a cover letter describing the study. A total of 119 completed questionnaires were returned and 8 came back unopened due to incomplete or nonforwardable addresses, yielding a return rate of 69%.

The questionnaire was a one-page checklist. Based on preliminary research of the range and kind of service delivery offered at shelters, questions were developed to assess the following: type of informal/supportive counseling available, type of formal/in-depth therapeutic services available, techniques utilized, resources and assistance programs available, funding, housing capacity, accommodations for children, staff number and qualifications, and follow-up services available.

Results

As this was an exploratory study, results are of a general and descriptive nature. The focus of the study centered on the type of therapy and techniques utilized at shelters. Results in Table 1 show that informal/supportive counseling services are provided at almost all shelters: hotline services (82%), support

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Insert Table 1 about here

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groups (76%) and individual counseling (90%). Formal, in-depth therapy services are not offered at as many shelters due in part to the number of staff at the

shelters and the relatively few number of professionals working at each shelter. However, as seen in Table 2, regarding conjoint therapy (where two members of

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Insert Table 2 about here

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the family are seen together), 32% of the shelters report seeing the husband and wife together and 33% see the wife and child together.

In relation to intervention techniques (Table 3), results show that the

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Insert Table 3 about here

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majority of shelters exist to provide a resource for individuals in crisis situations (crisis interventions, 81%). However, a number of shelters do employ techniques from family therapy: 34% - behavioral contracts, 14% - behavior modification, 46% - communication skills training, 54% - problem solving skills, and 35% - role-playing. When these techniques are combined into the theoretical models discussed above, results show that 37% of the shelters take a general systems approach (problem-solving tasks and communication skills) and 23% a social exchange approach (behavior modification, behavioral contracts, and role playing techniques).

Discussion

In terms of the therapeutic services provided by shelters, it is encouraging to see techniques derived from a family therapy approach being utilized. Currently, the emphasis seems to be on helping the woman cope with the situation at hand, providing individual supportive services and immediate assistance in a crisis. However, results suggest that a shift towards helping the marital couple/family involved in spouse abuse seems to be occurring. These findings thus reflect an

emerging focus on long-term resolution of marital conflict and spousal violence by involving the family in therapy. The two theories discussed, social exchange and general systems and the corresponding techniques based on behavioral and communication methods could provide viable interventions to be used in the treatment of spouse abuse.

TABLE 1

TYPES OF INFORMAL SUPPORTIVE COUNSELING

	Percent* (N=119)
Hotline	82%
Religious	13%
Support Groups	76%
Individual	90%
Group	65%
Family	47%
Couple	46%
Conjoint (other than couple)	27%

*Totals to more than 100% because more than one type of counseling was typically used.

TABLE 2

TYPES OF IN-DEPTH FORMAL THERAPY

		Percent* (N=119)
Individual		48%
Conjoint:	Husband-Wife	32%
	Husband-Child	13%
	Wife-Child	32%
Family (members seen):	Wife	35%
	Husband	24%
	Child	32%
Groups:	Husband-Wife	13%
	Women	46%
	Men	9%
	Mixed Group	2%

*Totals to more than 100% because more than one type of therapy was typically used

TABLE 3

TYPES OF THERAPEUTIC ORIENTATION AND TECHNIQUES

	Percent* (N=119)
Behavioral orientation	33%
Crisis intervention	81%
Feminist orientation	45%
Client-centered	52%
Gestalt	23%
Psychoanalytic	1%
Rational-emotive	18%
Reality	41%
Transactional analysis	23%
Eclectic	34%
Behavioral contract	34%
Behavioral modification	14%
Communication skills training	46%
Encounter	10%
Problem-solving tasks	52%
Role-playing	35%
Diagnostic testing	6%
Assertive training	3%
Family orientation	3%
Cognitive	3%
Ego	3%
Relaxation training	3%

*Totals to more than 100% because more than one orientation or technique typically used

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